

**Review: Rachel Carson and Her Sisters: Extraordinary Women Who Have Shaped
America's Environment**
By Robert K. Musil

Reviewed by Byron Anderson
DeKalb, Illinois, USA

Musil, Robert K. *Rachel Carson and Her Sisters: Extraordinary Women Who Have Shaped America's Environment*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014. xxv, 309 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8135-6242-1 hardcover US \$26.95; 978-0-8135-6243-8 eBook

Rachel Carson and Her Sisters is a fitting tribute to a woman who was a notable marine biologist, nature writer, health scientist, and advocate. The term "sisters" is used for those women who shared a common allegiance, character, or purpose with Carson. From its earliest beginnings, "women have been central to the environmental movement ..." (p. xiv). The coverage expands from Susan Fenimore Cooper (1850s), America's first popular nature writer, to contemporaries of Carson during the 1960s. The focus is on women who foreshadow Carson's passions of "amateur ornithology, scientific concern with pollution and environmental health, a love of language and writing, and active advocacy" (p. 3).

Carson was not alone, but rather was a product of predecessors and a network of contemporary professionals. She had connections to some extraordinary women, as well as environmental groups, scientists, and research centers. Examples of predecessors included Florence Merriam Bailey, environmental author and organizer and Ellen Swallow Richards, considered the first lady of American science, and contemporaries included Theo Colburn, who introduced endocrine disruption and human health, Terry Tempest Williams, writer, naturalist and activist, and Sandra Steingraber, tracker of environmental causes of cancer. In total, approximately two dozen sisters are introduced. The individual stories of the sisters show how difficult it was for a woman to succeed in most any field of science. Males proved to be harsh critics of scientific observations when combined with female nature writing, moral values, and emotional engagement.

The 19th century foremothers turned their interest in nature into a concern for the environment. By the twentieth century there was a nationwide conservation movement, which gradually expanded to cover health and the effects of chemicals and other pollutants. Carson was able to draw on new developments in toxicology, epidemiology, and environmental health. Her appeal was being able to make science accessible to the average educated reader. Carson's writing found an early audience in her best seller, *The Sea Around Us* (1951), a National Book Award winner. By the time *Silent Spring*

(1962) appeared she had a wide following and was generally considered a major mover of the global environmental movement. She died of breast cancer in 1964.

The book does not detail the complete life of Carson, but rather focuses on what she gained from the sisters who preceded her, what she gave to her contemporaries, and the legacy left for those who succeeded her. The book, appearing at the 50th anniversary of Carson's death, follows a string of publications on and by Carson, including, *On a Farther Shore: the life and legacy of Rachel Carson* (2012), *Silent Spring Revisited* (2012), and a juvenile title, *Rachel Carson: environmental pioneer* (2014). The author, Robert Musil, teaches environmental politics and history at American University and is a senior fellow at the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies. Carson remains among us through her writings and those writing about her. *Rachel Carson and Her Sisters* should appeal to general readers and those with interest in environmental studies and women's studies. Highly recommended.

Byron Anderson, beau804@yahoo.com, Retired/Northern Illinois University Libraries,
DeKalb, IL 60115 USA

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